

## Prayer

Great Lord and merciful Father; we speak to You not by any right, but by Your invitation. Receive our prayers for friends and for family, for those who suffer and those who face trials, for people who try hard to do Your will and people who feel they fail. All Your people Lord, who You have made according to Your will; all of us who follow You need a touch of Your grace and the liberty of Your Spirit. Bless us we pray as we commit to You: AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Gifts of the Spirit

*Pray for a Biblical understanding of the priority of love in the exercise of all spiritual gifts (as in 1 Corinthians 13). Pray that all God's people might be open to God's gifts.*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray about advertising and its influence on young people*
- *Pray for young people who know nothing but a life of crime*
- *Give thanks for the fellowship of believers throughout the world*

## Meditation

How can anyone praise God in the midst of suffering?

Except by faith in Christ, who suffered and whose spirit was never broken!

How can anyone have faith in God in a world of scepticism?

Unless they acknowledge that human reasoning may sometimes be faulty!

How can anyone trust that the Bible reports the truth?

Except by respecting the testimony of those who have read it, and lived it!

How can anyone accept that God heals some but not others?

Unless the spirit has found that salvation is worth more than physical health!

How can anyone believe that God is love when so many suffer?

Except by finding that He is with us in our suffering, and will never be defeated!

*Or to put it another way;*

How can anyone just ignore what Christian faith has been saying for years?

Except by putting their head in the sand of our materialistic world!

## Bible Study - Isaiah 52:7-12

<sup>7</sup> *How beautiful on the mountains,  
are the feet of one who brings  
news,  
who announces peace,  
one who brings good news,  
who announces salvation,  
saying to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'*

<sup>8</sup> *The sound of your watchmen –  
they lift up their voices,  
together they sing for joy;*

*for they will see in their own eyes  
the return of the LORD to Zion.*

<sup>9</sup> *Break out and sing together,  
you ruins of Jerusalem;  
for the LORD has comforted his  
people,  
He has redeemed Jerusalem.*

<sup>10</sup> *The LORD has bared his holy arm  
In the sight of all the nations;  
and all the ends of the earth*

*will see the salvation of our God.*

*you who carry the things of the*

*LORD.*

<sup>11</sup> *Get away! get away!*

*Get out of there!*

*Touch nothing unclean;*

*go out from the midst of her,*

*Purify yourselves,*

<sup>12</sup> *For you will not go out in haste,*

*you will not go fleeing;*

*for the LORD goes before you,*

*and the God of Israel is your rear*

*guard.*

### **Review**

This beautiful poem has captivated people for centuries, and it brings to a climax the anticipation of God's holy acts of redemption and salvation. It begins with the description of a messenger coming to Zion bringing news of peace, liberty and salvation, and declaring the reign of Almighty God (52:7-8) and it calls on the 'ruins of Jerusalem' to rejoice and praise God because she has been saved (52:9,10)! Finally, the people of Jerusalem are called to 'get away' and begin a journey hinted at by the words 'the Lord goes before you, and the God of Israel is your rear guard.' (52:11,12). There is no doubt that we can take a number of sentences or verses from this passage and use them to illustrate Christian themes such as salvation, redemption and the powerful work of God; but as a single prophecy it is not immediately clear what it all means.

After all Isaiah's prophecies telling us that God's intends to bring redemption to the world through His Servant (see 50:3) and create a new Jerusalem of liberated people who will bring the light of His love to the world (see 49:1f.), the announcement is profoundly puzzling. We are not told what God has done to make this so! The messenger announces the result of God's work, but not the work of the Servant or the deed done by which this is all achieved. We are in the position, albeit a wonderful position, of those who receive the news of something wonderful (like the birth of a baby) before we know the possibly difficult or painful details of what has happened!

In order to understand this prophecy, we must recognise that Isaiah is painting a picture of God's eternal saving work on an enormous literary canvass, so in order to interpret the passage we must step back and view the canvass. Yes, the Lord is about to reveal 'the deed', and the details of how the Servant brings salvation (Isaiah 53), but the purpose of this passage is to conclude the vast sweep of Isaiah's prophecies from chapter 40 to chapter 52, which anticipate chapter 53. It is like a great summary, prophetically anticipating God's great work of salvation through the Servant just before Isaiah reveals the details! This is all crystal clear because the talk of a messenger coming to make an announcement of news of salvation echoes what we have previously read in chapter 40. Remember, Isaiah said;

*'Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings; lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!' See, the Lord comes with His might ... He will feed His flock like a shepherd ...' (Isaiah 40:9-11).*

If you compare chapter 40 and chapter 52 carefully, you will discover that the identity and the task of the 'herald' is in fact different in each chapter. In chapter 40, Zion (Jerusalem) herself is the messenger, and her task is to announce God's coming and bring the good news of His salvation to the whole world. However, here in chapter 52, we see an unknown messenger bringing the news to Zion that salvation has been won and is now available to be taken out into the world. Indeed, the messenger concludes by telling Zion to get on with her task with regal authority (not with haste – 52:12) because salvation has now been won and is available!

2. Why do you think that Isaiah conveys this prophecy to us before revealing the work of the Servant?
3. How can verses 11 and 12 help us understand God's mission for the church, and how can this be put into practice?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*Although we live in an age of instant communication, there are plenty of occasions when we receive news and act on it without knowing the full story. Perhaps the best example is the way in which we might sign a contract before fully reading the 'small print'; mostly, we read this later at our own convenience, hopefully in time to get out of a deal if we have made a bad move. However, this is not a good way to illustrate this text, because the work of the Servant cannot really be called the 'small print' of the message of salvation! For this reason, we need to get to know scripture well so that we understand those connections which illustrate its major themes.*

### Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Praise God for the salvation you have received. If you do not know what to do to offer praise, then open your Bible in the Psalms and look for some which express your own thoughts and feelings. Read the Psalm aloud*
- *Write down what this passage of scripture tells you about the duty of a Christian to bear the message of redemption and salvation. Write down your own feelings about how you can help fulfil this call.*

## Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, grant us the courage to respond to Your call whenever and however it comes. May we not be afraid to trust ourselves and our families into Your hands, and follow Your lead for every part of our journey in this life. In this way, may we walk with You, Lord Jesus, into eternal life. AMEN

By speaking in this way, Isaiah highlights God's intention and purpose to use Zion to bring the good news of salvation (52:7) to the whole world, and we have already discovered that Zion (Jerusalem), is the prophet's name for God's people (52:1 etc.). In addition, by jumping ahead of the actual work of salvation and announcing what God has done before we know the details of what has happened (see Isaiah 52:13f and 53), Isaiah creates an enormous sense of anticipation. We cannot wait to discover what God has done with the Servant to make salvation possible. Tomorrow we will find out!

### **Going Deeper**

The picture of a runner bringing news of victory or defeat is one which occurs many times in the Old Testament, and if we study this, we will discover more about the herald who brings 'glad tidings'. In addition, we must try and understand why the prophecy bids us to rejoice in God's work of redemption before we know how it has been achieved (52:9). Lastly, we will look at the instructions in verses 11 and 12 because they are clearly important, standing immediately before the unique revelation we will pick up in the verse which follow (tomorrow's study).

### **Notes on the text and translation**

- V8 *'they will see in their own eyes' The Hebrew is clearly a colloquial phrase which literally reads 'for eye in eye they will see ...' My translation is a best attempt to make meaning out of this.*
- V9 *'Break out and sing together' Most translations have 'break out into singing ...' but here, the Hebrew does not give a noun for the word 'singing'; it gives a verb in the form of a command, so I have translated the word 'sing' exactly as that, a command, along with 'break out'. The sentence could mean 'break out' into song but it could also mean 'break out' of captivity and sing ...!*
- V12 *'for the Lord goes before you.' The Hebrew gives 'for the Lord is the one going ahead of you.' Most version translate this in the future tense to match the first half of the verse, but the tense of the verb is merely assumed, and it makes more sense to translate it as the present, because the promise will be brought about because of the nature of God which is to be with His people. This is not a promise that God will be with His people, for this is assumed to be so; it is a promise that His presence will have the effect of deliverance.*

### **The messenger**

In 2 Samuel 18 there is a famous story from the life of King David from the time when his son Absalom had thrown him out of Jerusalem. Ultimately, there was a battle fought between Joab (acting for David) and his men, and the armies of Israel led by the self-proclaimed pretender, Absalom. During the battle, Absalom was killed (in a freak accident – see 2 Sam 18:9); but Joab won the battle, paving the way for David to return to Jerusalem in triumph. After the battle, a young man of the priestly line of Zadok (Ahimaz) volunteered to run as a messenger and bring the good news of victory to David. Joab was cautious because he felt that if Ahimaz brought news that David's son Absalom was dead, the king might act unpredictably in grief for his son rather than rejoicing in the victory. A young 'Cushite' was given the job, but Ahimaz insisted and ran as well, outrunning the Cushite and delivering news of the victory to David. Later, the Cushite arrived to deliver the devastating news that Absalom was dead, and the King was utterly grief-stricken.

Although there are other 'messenger' stories in the Old Testament, it is highly likely that Isaiah had this well known incident in mind. It was well known in his day, and it does not take much for us to connect this with what Isaiah was saying in his prophecies. In Isaiah 52:7, we find ourselves in the same position as David, knowing that the battle has been

fought but not knowing the result. In this prophecy as in 2 Samuel, a watchman sees someone coming. Now in 2 Samuel (18:24) the watchman believed that the running was like that of Ahimaz, and believed that this prominent young man from a priestly family would not have been allowed to bring a message unless it was a good one, and told this to David. For a short while (2 Sam 18:28) there was the hope of great rejoicing. David had won and the Kingdom of Israel had been liberated from the evil of ungodly rule! However, the Cushite arrived just after Ahimaz and revealed the death of David's son Absalom.

The connection with our passage is therefore clear. The watchman anticipated a message of good news of victory and announced it before he knew the full story (52:8)! We are therefore caught up in a moment of time, rejoicing in the great news of salvation just before the full truth is revealed to us that someone has died in order to make that victory possible (the Servant, God's own Son! - Isaiah 53)! In our world of instant messaging, we do not necessarily appreciate the extraordinary tension of ancient times when battles were fought, won and lost, and it took some time before news could reach those it affected. This is the tension conveyed by Isaiah in this passage; it may be far more confusing to us today because of our assumptions about communication than for people of ancient times.

### ***The message***

The message however, is still glorious. David took the news about the death of his son very badly, and his army commander Joab had to lecture him severely in order to make him come to terms with his grief (see 2 Sam 19:1-8). So, also, we may respond with unpredictability to the news about how salvation is won through the suffering and death of the Servant (Isaiah 53), but this is a heavenly victory of immensely important proportions. Like David, we must accept the death as the price of victory, and we must act on the basis of the victory rather than our emotional response or agony over the price of that victory.

Isaiah seems to be saying to us therefore, that despite the coming news of the Suffering Servant, our eyes must be on the amazing truth that God loves the whole world and has made salvation available to all. We will undoubtedly respond in a number of ways to the coming news of the price paid by the Servant (Isaiah 53), but our duty under God is to accept the power and eternal truth of the Gospel and rejoice in it! The power of verses 8 to 10 lie in the combination of announcing the news of salvation and being joyful about it! It may seem paradoxical to many people that Christians rejoice on Sunday, celebrating the death and resurrection of their Saviour. However, those who do not understand or experience the power of resurrection will not be able to appreciate that worship and happiness is an appropriate response to the death of Christ, because of His love for us; and this lies at the heart of Christian worship and witness.

Ultimately, what Christ has done for us opens up the possibility of salvation and liberation for all people for all times, and this is something we can only praise God for if we accept that this is true. If you read the long story about David in 2 Samuel 18 and 19, you will perceive that David was vulnerable and it was not entirely certain that he would be able to accept the death of his son and do the 'right thing' by claiming the crown of Israel again. As mere human beings, our reactions to truth are unpredictable, but by the grace of God and together with David, we can choose to believe in the strength of our God, who has 'bared His holy arm' (52:10) and acted in power to save us because He loves us.

### ***The consequences of the message***

It seems that Isaiah is intent upon telling us our duty before revealing the truth about the work of the Servant, and verses 11 and 12 tell us that once we have received the message of salvation we have a holy duty to take it out into the world!

The strange words 'Get away! Get away! Get out of there! Touch nothing unclean; go out from the midst of her, purify yourselves you who carry the things of God!' (verse 11), echo the marching orders given to priests. When holy objects were moved, as were the Tabernacle and the Ark when the people of Israel were in the desert, the priests designated to carry the things of God were called on to 'purify themselves'. This meant following the instructions given to them by God (via Moses) to keep themselves ritually clean as they carried out their holy task of carrying the 'things of God'. In the same way, Christian people are therefore called to holiness when they take the Gospel out to the world and to the nations. The path of holiness for a Christian is one which requires a study of the New Testament, but is based on following the guidance of the Holy Spirit who is given to us primarily through baptism as we place our trust in Christ (the Servant).

Finally, Isaiah makes some incredibly powerful and salient points about how those who have the message of salvation should proceed to bring it to the world. Yes, this is advice about Christian mission! 'Your will not go out in haste, you will not go fleeing; for the Lord goes before you, and the God of Israel is your rear guard.' These words remind us of God's presence with His people during their journey through the desert, when the Lord was a cloud or a fire, but when they walked through the Red Sea to find their liberty, the cloud split and both guided them forward and also formed a 'rear' guard behind them. The passage in Exodus which describes this has long been regarded as a great mystery ('the pillar of cloud moved ... and took up a place behind them' Ex 14:19) but it is a powerful text which brings light to the Gospel precisely because of Isaiah's use of it here.

The whole text is a prophecy of reassurance designed to help us just before we receive the devastating news of what will happen to the Servant, in bringing salvation to the world.

### **Application**

This scripture is astonishing, and although many of its words may be a familiar, the full meaning of the text may not be something we have considered. It seems to say to us that whatever the cost of salvation, our task is to bring the saving work of God to the world. Frankly, this is the touchstone of the life of the church, for unless we measure up in some way to the requirements set out here in this scripture, then we fail to respond as God intends to the Gospel message. Churches which have no other purpose or intent than to be the vehicle of God's salvation of all people fulfil their purpose, but churches which exist for the religious satisfaction of those who wish to attend fall short of the mark. They can hardly be said to fulfil their God-given role.

Most of this text however, is a powerful warning to us that although we are about to hear a terrible message about the work of salvation (Isaiah 53), our task is to proclaim the victory! Of course, the contents of Isaiah are supremely important for all human history, because they speak about the work of the Servant in a way which explains what happened to Jesus on the Cross. Paul expresses the balance of the Christian message well when He says 'Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead ... Christ has been raised, the first fruits of those who have died' (1 Cor 15:13,20). In this phrase, he acknowledges the essential fact of Christ's death for the sins of the world, but emphasises that the Gospel is released into the world by power and victory because of the resurrection. This is our call as God's people.

### **Questions** *(for use in groups)*

1. What does this passage of scripture tell us about, or how does it illustrate, the Christian Gospel?